

Today's Editorial - Thursday, March 8th, 2007



Reviews On 2006/2007
From Gia McNutt - CEO, SOS

Gia McNutt New believes contact center technology has radically changed the face of customer service. In the next 12 months, she says, the gap will widen between companies with 21st century "smart" contact centers and those with yesterday's phone-only call centers.

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What has been the greatest challenge the contact center industry has faced in the last 12 months?

New contact center technology has radically changed the face of customer service. Companies that already have adopted these new capabilities have reduced costs while improving customer satisfaction. They have gained a competitive edge and profited.

Multimedia is quickly becoming a business requirement in contact centers, the ability of agents and end customers to communicate via phone, the web, text chat, email and fax. Contact centers must be able to queue or distribute interactions regardless of the channel, and report on all channels in a comprehensive fashion.

The landscape has changed in terms of what customers perceive as great service today. It's important to understand how each customer prefers to communicate, then personalize your interactions based on your customers' preferences, as well as their specific status as prospect or customer. Complex transactions become easier to handle when an agent and a customer can pick the form of communication that best suits their needs at any given time.

This has a major impact on costs as well. The average call center phone call costs anywhere between \$3 and \$8, but an IVR or web interaction costs pennies. For those who can successfully divert a significant percentage of repetitive interactions to either or both of these other customer service methods, the return on investment is huge and comes in a very short time.

In 2007, what do you think will be the top priorities for

(a) Contact Center Managers

In order to out-service your competition, you need integration and automation so all agents are empowered with more information than your competitors' agents. At this point, that's not hard to do since many contact centers are just beginning to think about these things. You have the opportunity to put a huge gap between yourselves and your competitors in an arena that is certain to change the way customer service is delivered.

Screen pops provide pre-emptive customer information such as exactly who is calling, as well as invaluable information about customer past purchases and trending. That allows you to upsell and cross-sell, or advance-sell, and it slashes several seconds off of each call. This is hugely valuable.

Managers also need digital recording and real-time monitoring and reporting. These indispensable tools will revolutionize their ability to manage events as they are happening instead of just getting historical reports after the event has concluded.

(b) Company Executives?

Staffing recruitment and retention are key contact center concerns. In certain regions the demand for qualified agents has increased and rates have soared, resulting in a shortage of supply.

Skilled agents are expensive to develop, and high turnover is expensive. So it's pretty clear that a contact center with the management tools to allow agents to effectively work from satellite offices or from home, and the ability to manage and

monitor those agents just as if they were physically in the contact center, can be easily cost-justified in a short period of time. You break through geographic boundaries, hire from the lowest-cost geographies, and get higher skills from wherever they exist.

A centralized IP contact center can route an incoming call to the nearest customer service office. If one of the agents is available, the caller is speaking to a local person that knows the area and knows market specifics. If they are all busy, the "virtual contact center" system can route the call to agents elsewhere rather than overloading agents in one office. The differentiator in customer satisfaction is immediate.

With an accurate prediction of volume and types of interactions, a contact center can rapidly fill in staffing for short periods of high interactions. If you can predict a two-hour spike in Web interactions about product "X" on Wednesday night due to a marketing event, your contact center manager can call a highly skilled agent and ask them to fill in for two hours during the projected peak. The agent can simply log in during this period and help handle the volume then stop and go back to watching a movie with their family. That's only two hours out of their family time rather than six hours spent getting ready for work, driving to the office, working two hours, and driving home.

What do you believe will have the biggest impact on the industry over the next 12 months?

The gap will widen between companies with 21st century "smart" contact centers and those with yesterday's phone-only call centers. Old circuit-switched technologies present too many barriers to expansion.

For the older generation of customers, picking up the phone still comes most naturally. But a newer generation has developed new habits. Teenagers today spend less time talking on their cell phones and more time sending text messages, sometimes for hours on end. Contact centers had better be ready to meet them where they feel most comfortable.

Some are predicting an upcoming paradigm shift from email to instant messaging as the prevalent means of communication. Contact centers will need to be agile in regards to the various communications channels and self-service capabilities.

What impact have "external events" even had on your company have you adapted your business?

The strong demand for VoIP technology has meant another year of fast growth. SOS has deepened its penetration into selected vertical markets, and has been able to expand staff by more than one-third by attracting key employees from major companies such as Cisco Systems.

Do you feel the service you personally get as a customer is better or worse than it was a year ago?

I personally now prefer self-service, if available, rather than speaking to a live person, who may misunderstand me and require me to repeat myself. Self-service is no longer seen as a lack of service, but is increasingly a competitive edge. However self-service hasn't been adopted as much as I would have hoped. I get impatient with trying to find something or use a tool.

Also, I am tickled by great service, when someone remembers me and what I like. It is absolutely a differentiator for me in selecting the firms I do business with.

About Gia McNutt :

Gia McNutt is experienced in advanced communications solutions for business. Since 1992, hundreds of businesses including Trader Joe's and Vegas.com have chosen the SOS team for IP communications, call center technology, and network security solutions. McNutt has served on the Cisco Commercial Channel Advisory Board since November 2002. She also served for years on the VentureTech Advisory Council and on the VAR Business Advisory Board.

About SOS :

SOS, a provider of integrated advanced communications solutions for midsize and small businesses, supplies voice, data, and telephony management services. SOS solutions enable organizations to simplify communications, enhance productivity, and leverage real-time business intelligence. Often deployed over a single Internet Protocol platform, SOS's solutions bridge the gap between legacy phone/data services and sophisticated telephony systems.

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